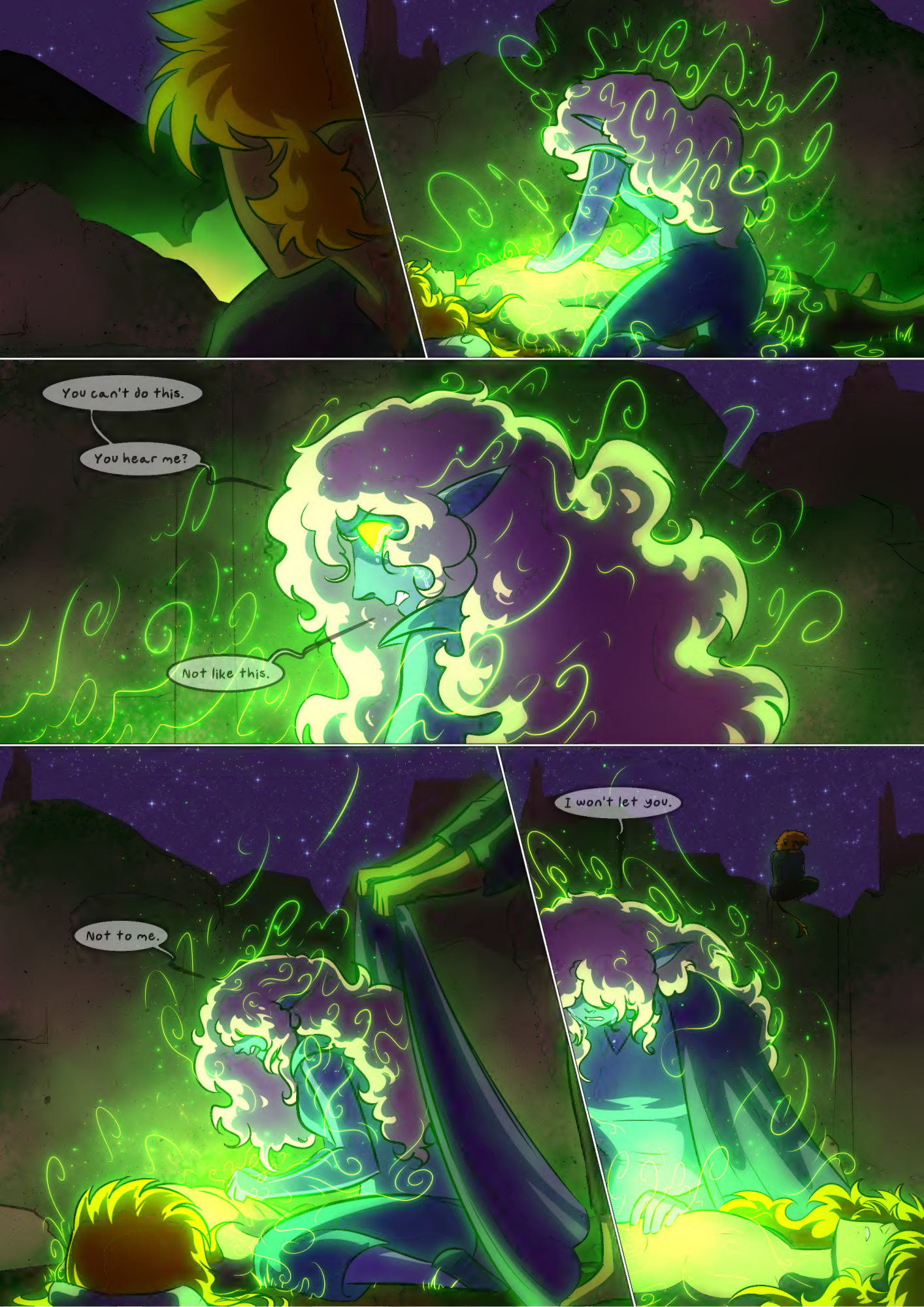
Chapter 19

Petrichor

Fascinating.

How are you feeling?
Did I...
hurt anyone?
No-one who didn't deserve it, believe me.
You don't remember?
Not clearly.
Only flashes.
Where's Kendal?

Ah-
Kendal will be fine.
Alinva's healing him.
It's best if we don't interrupt.
Is she good?
Quite possibly the best.
Between her ability and Kendal's prodigious physical fortitude, there's no reason to worry.
Good.
That's good.
...Where are WE?
Ah, right.
This is an Ancient ruin about an hour's north of Zuurith.
I traveled here once for research. It's deserted and disappointingly boring.
A good place to privately recover with low risk of pursuit.
In the meantime, I've been very patiently waiting for you to stop being on fire.
O-oh. Sorry.
Now I have some questions -


You can't do this.
You hear me?
Not like this.
Not to me.
I won't let you.

I didn't know.
Nobody did.
All we knew was that I wasn't a mage.
Tests confirmed it. My soul was completely closed to the elements.
It was rare for an ignan, but not technically impossible.
Did you or your family seek out the cause, or pursue any treatments?
We considered it, but I was happy and healthy otherwise, and I had higher priorities.
Higher priorities?
There was apparently a slight possibility that any soul-channels I had were sealed as I transitioned.
Given the choice...
Ah. I understand.
In hindsight, I don't think I was ever going to be a mage.
Whatever this is...
I think it was born with me.

I suspect that's accurate.
If you're not a mage, that means those abilities don't come from channeling primordial fire energy. It must be an internal trait.
Kendal called that man "Tahraim."
And a transformation that extreme would devastate the soul of anyone whose body wasn't prepared for the change.
Your dissolution into fire and later reconstitution imply an incredibly complex process to use your body's own fire to transmute its other elements into and out of a denser form.
Ah - that wasn't Kendal, technically.
Tahraim the smith god.
He called me a crucible.
He said -
"You are the fire."
When did he say that?
He was only briefly around to deal with Tynan.
Oh - no, this was before that.
In the arena, after I fought Kendal.
It was the second time I'd really lost control.
Tahraim talked me down. It was like he knew exactly how it felt.
He gave me enough control to fight Tynan.
The second time?
Could you tell me what happened the first time?
It's not pleasant, but...
...I can try.

There was a wyrm nest at the base of Drunn Ainox - a volcano to the west of my home.
The wyrms had abandoned it a sef earlier, leaving the wyrmsilk empty and undefended.
We always needed more wyrmsilk. It's fireproof, and when woven correctly it can turn aside most blades.
When there was nothing to fight, the Ravvan would strike out into the desert to hunt and gather resources.
I'd set my sights on the silk in the nest.
Ravvan?
Standing army of trained warriors. They fight the scary stuff in the desert to keep it away from the settlements.
Didn't you recognize the pattern on his cloak?
Do you mind?
Go outside more.
The weather was good, the wyrms were nowhere to be seen, and they hadn't even left any nasty surprises in the silk.
Sometimes they wrap up animals or automatons, or they abandon clutches of eggs, but this time we were lucky.
I was so caught up in the routine, I didn't think to wonder -
What had scared the wyrms away?

Most of us had never seen an Obsidian Ghoul before.
They're creatures of magma and rock, hardly ever found outside of volcanic caves.
Drann never got a chance to see one.
Fire doesn't hurt them, and physical weapons just crack the outer shell.
Without water or ice to disrupt their molten core, they can't be stopped.
Out in the desert, unprepared, we didn't have much of either.
It was a straight shot back to the settlement. I remember Lainn shouting that we couldn't lead them back to the houses.
I remember Rase yelling back that we didn't stand a chance fighting them on the slopes either.
After that, things got...
...blurry.

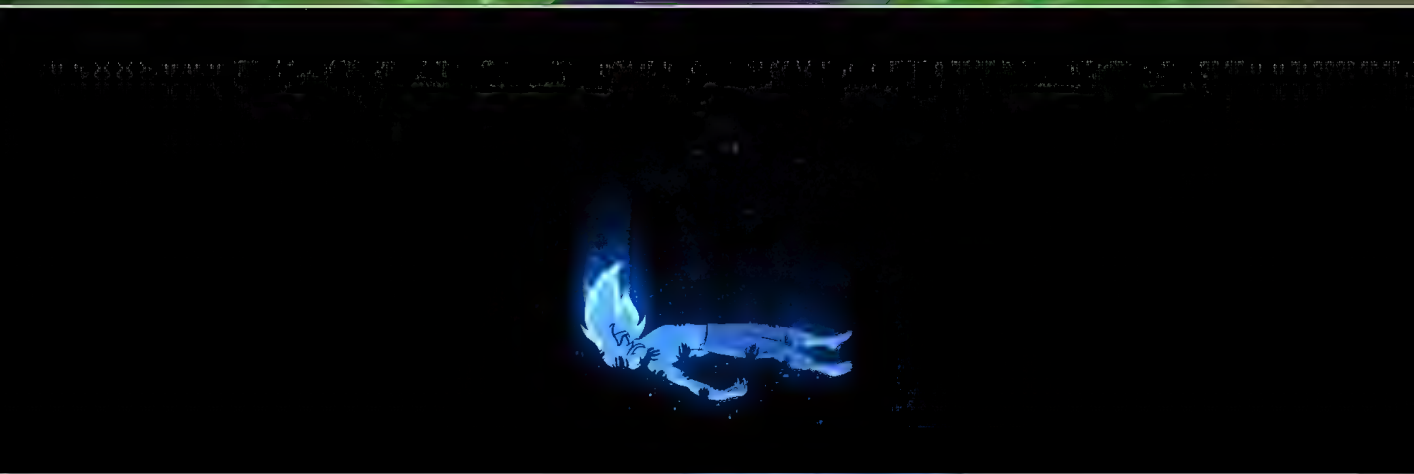
I... wish I could tell you what happened.
All I remember is how it felt.
It was rage and pain and grief and guilt -
and it was so much bigger than I was.
There was nowhere else it could go.
I don't remember what happened next.

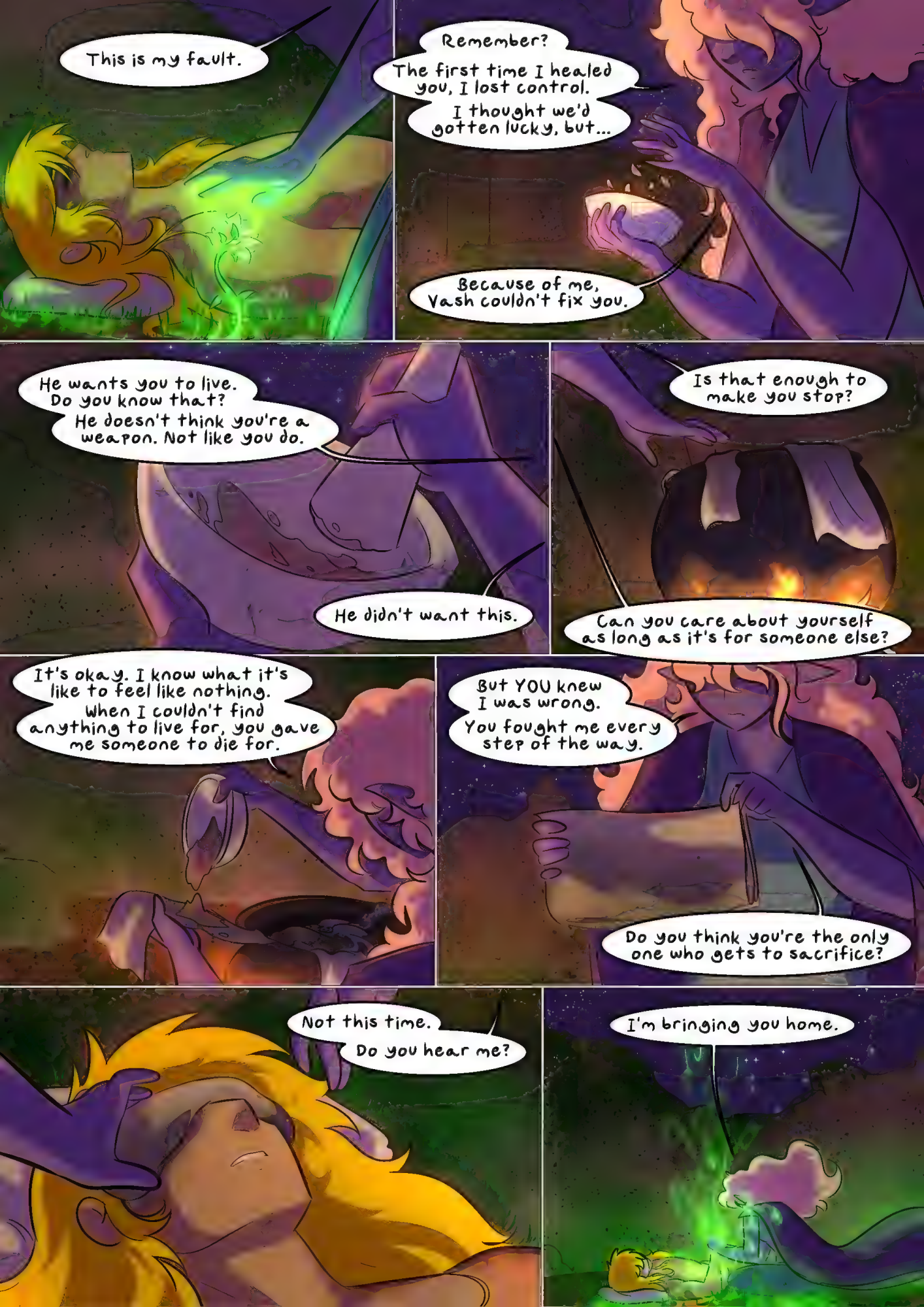
Lainn broke away and got word to the town before the fight reached it.
They told me later that the buildings were empty by the time I reached them.
That I ignored everyone and everything but the ghouls.
That the damage looked a lot worse than it was.
I didn't believe them.
I know what directionless rage looks like.
I... wasn't in good shape when I burned out.
It took me a while to fully recover.
When I was well enough, the town elder came to see me.
She told me what I'd already guessed.
There was only one monster that could do what I'd done.
I was a Demon.
None of us knew what that meant.
And if I didn't want to destroy everything I loved, I needed to go find out.

They exiled you?
Harsh.
No. It was the right thing to do.
Demons are legendary. They're supposed to be able to single-handedly rout armies.
If I can learn to control it, I could protect them better than anyone else.
If I can't...
At least I won't be there to hurt them.
So what's your plan? Who's going to teach you?
I...
I'm not sure.
Before I met Tahraim, I thought it was hopeless.
I didn't think I'd ever get to go home.
Maybe if I can find him again...
I wouldn't rely on a god for something like this.
They're notoriously bad at matters of personal scale.
He's the only lead I have.
He WAS.
We're traveling to the Soulshaper Monastery on Helm. They have assisted the needs of many unusual people before.
And I happen to have spent some time in their library.
They apparently once housed a woman described as a highly unusual fire mage who donated her writings after her stay.
She had some thoughts on the transmutative properties of fire that I had previously dismissed as wholly theoretical thought experiments.
You might find more meaning than I did in her "Treatise on Soulfire."

She-
You-!
I can't promise that she was a Crucible, but it's a better starting point than chasing gods.
Thank you!
SQUISH
I - I didn't even know where to start.
I thought I'd have to figure it out alone!
I'll explain this all to the others once Kendal's back on his feet.
Well, uh... no fear of that.
It's our next stop. You'll have plenty of company.
Considering how you came to our rescue, I doubt I'll hear any objections.
Thank you.
Until then -
I'll make sure nothing sneaks up on us.
Looks like you've gotten better at making friends.
Mm.
So what was that REALLY about?

What do you-?
You haven't told them what the Monks did for you.
Don't worry. That's your business, not mine.
But if you take them to the Monks, they'll find out for sure.
You're ready to spill your greatest secret to someone you just met today.
Erin, I came looking for you because Al called me.
He hadn't heard from you since you went into the Storm. Mom was getting worried.
Everything's a little fuzzy after Tynan put me in that crater -
- but something happened to you. Something you couldn't control.
That's what this is all about, isn't it?
Something happened to you in the Storm.
And you need the Monks to fix it before anyone finds out.
How bad is it?
As bad as it gets.




This is my fault.
Remember?
The first time I healed you, I lost control.
I thought we'd gotten lucky, but...
Because of me, Vash couldn't fix you.
He wants you to live. Do you know that?
He doesn't think you're a weapon. Not like you do.
He didn't want this.
Is that enough to make you stop?
Can you care about yourself as long as it's for someone else?
It's okay. I know what it's like to feel like nothing.
When I couldn't find anything to live for, you gave me someone to die for.
But YOU knew I was wrong.
You fought me every step of the way.
Do you think you're the only one who gets to sacrifice?
Not this time.
Do you hear me?
I'm bringing you home.

Yikes.
To put it mildly.
After everything you did. What a kick in the teeth.
I prefer to think of it as the price of power.
This is just another problem for me to solve.
The soulshaper monks are only my first try.
I figured you'd have contingencies.
Do your new friends have anything to do with it?
That wasn't my intention. Kendal wanted to help me, and Alinva goes where he does.
But it is... why I agreed to bring them along.
Dainix's transmuted form was completely unfazed by The Dragon's attacks. That's very promising, and far too valuable for me to lose.
Alinva seems to be the vessel of Primordial Life herself, and her power TERRIFIES the Dragon. She may potentially be his equal.
And Kendal's divine origin makes him quite possibly the only living being in the world who is completely free of The Dragon's elemental presence. He cannot be corrupted.
That's why I haven't contacted anyone - including you.
I know you'll try to help despite your vulnerability - and I can't allow you to make that mistake.

Because The Dragon is really good at using you to kill people without one-in-a-million immunities?
Yes. I refuse to put any of you at risk.
Makes sense.
Counterpoint:
Falst.
What?
You know, the little angry one.
I know who he-
He's tough as nails, but it sounds like The Dragon could kill him like anyone else.
Why is he in the gang?
Falst... saved all our lives. We owe him a lot.
So putting him up against The Dragon is doing him a favor?
Of course not!
I explained the danger to him in full, and he didn't care.
I got the impression he was accustomed to far worse than vague existential threats.
Besides, his perspective is often more... worldly than ours. I find that contrast invaluable.
You're making good points that have nothing to do with the star-eating dragon problem.
Tess, what do you want me to say?
I'm not going to abandon him to prove a point to you!
Of course you won't.
Because even if you think it's smart, you don't abandon people.
Neither do I.

Why am I so terrible at keeping you safe?
Because it's not your decision.
...I missed you.
I missed you too.
And the haircut looks great.

Oh!
You're perceptive.
I thought you'd be back at camp. Doesn't Alinva need to heal you?
That's the last thing she needs right now.
Look, I get that Ferin heal fast, but-
Pick that one up in the arena?
...Yes. But it doesn't mean you don't need rest!
I've rested plenty today.
A mountain fell on you and you ran face-first into an explosion.
Yeah, but I had a real nice nap before that.
Did I... hurt you?

What?
When I transformed.
I just - you seem very angry with me.
If I hurt you or something-
Oh, no, no!
I was completely FINE!
Of course, you nearly killed Erin-
-and because Kendal had to step in, Tynan nearly killed HIM-
-and that's AFTER you apparently went berserk and tried to kill him in the Arena!
Now he's barely alive, Alinva's inconsolable and all Erin can focus on is how you took out The Dragon -
-but at least I'M okay, right?!
CLICK

Do you think that doesn't matter?
I saw how hard you pushed yourself when we were-
Let me ask you something.
Do you really think you're a monster?
I-
You gave them every reason to see you that way, right?
They saw you at your absolute lowest.
And then they trusted you anyway.
So you're thinking -
They gave me a chance, after what I did to them.
They're kind. They're generous. I'm so lucky.
Or maybe they're just naive.
If I don't protect them, they'll get themselves killed by monsters like me.

Just... checking...
Does this conversation end with you protecting them by attacking me?
Because I get it, but-
Oh for -
I don't think you're naive.
If THAT was my plan, do you really think I would've let you see me?!
Not unless you were being generous.
The kindness that Kendal showed me...
It didn't come from ignorance. He fought for it, and fought hard.
We both knew I could be better, but while I was giving up on myself, he refused to let me forget.
He wasn't giving me chances, he was showing me that I had choices.
I'm grateful to him, and to all of you.
I want to repay that kindness.
Good for you.
Oh.
I think I understand.
This isn't actually about me at all, is it?
You're lashing out at me, but the anger is directionless because it's fueled by guilt.
It's like you think this is your fault.

You wanna protect them? Fine. They need it.
But I don't.
I'm not some poor pitiful creature for you to fix -
I don't need you picking me apart out of some misplaced helpful urge -
Listen to me very carefully.
- and I DON'T WANT YOU IN MY HEAD!
...I'm-
-Wait.
What is-?
WHI

oof!
THUD

WHIZZ
KRAT
ZZZZZ

It needs a power source.
CRUNCH
SKREEE

CRACK
GAAAAAAARH!!

CHAK
SHAAA..
SKRAKT
RRR

CHUNK
Come on!
Don't!
It's still got my-!
CHOK
THUD

Erin.
Pst.
SNAP
What? What is-?

What's wrong? What happened?
Is he-?
FLUMP
SHAAAAA
He didn't wake up.

Gods, Alinua.
PLEASE clarify your highly ominous statements in the future.

So... he's alive?
Yes, and I think I understand the source of Alinva's distress.
His soul has healed to the point that the soul barrier has reasserted.
Life magic can no longer bypass it to accelerate his physical recovery.
Oh. Like Al.
Alinva, I understand why you're upset, but this is actually an excellent sign.
If his soul were losing cohesion it would indicate real danger.
Instead, this confirms he only needs time and care for his body to physically heal.
You know how sturdy he is. He'll be all right.
He didn't want to be all right.
Okay, she definitely needs to sleep now.
I'll take care of her.
You should sleep too. Knocking yourself out with a fireball doesn't count.
Point taken, but it'll have to wait.
Kendal still needs help, and...
Well.
With Dainix away and Kendal and Alinva both out of commission -
- my only precaution against The Dragon is my own vigilance.
Let's not compromise it.

We'll stay close by.
Shout if you need anything or get possessed.
You too.
sigh
Well, she certainly dragged you out of the worst of it, but I don't envy the aches you'll have when you wake up.
If I were you, I'd sleep for a sef straight.
Spare myself the bulk of the recovery.
Don't actually do that.
And definitely don't tell Alinva I suggested it.
What you did was heroic. I won't lose sight of that.
The people of Zuurith are still alive because of you.
So are we, but that isn't new.
But I am no stranger to self-destruction, and I'll be sharing some thoughts on that when you wake up.
Until then, I hope, wherever you are right now...
...you're having a more restful night than we are.

I'm sorry.
I failed you.

Gh-
AAHGH!!

SPLASH
HAHH HAHH

I have nothing left.
If I were stronger, I could fight through the Caves and save you from The Collector.
But this is all I am, and it isn't enough.
And if I were weaker, you could've undone me and reclaimed your body once and for all.
But here we are.
You crafted me for a purpose I can't fulfill.
All I ever gave you was false hope.
Excuse me, my lord-
-but that's frankly untrue.